

# Giants Beyond Pluto

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Illustration:

Giant figures poured from the ship

"Earth does not answer!" When Otis Ludlow spoke those words, terror strode the void!

## I.

"OATS, damn it, hurry up!" Fred Vanray said impatiently. The chemist was in a hurry to get back to earth.

The little light of the distant sun squirmed through the thick glass of the observation port and, as if weary from its long journey, sprawled across the littered table. It touched the long-nosed pliers, the thin screw-driver, with which Otis Ludlow was working. It touched the tubes and coils which he was rapidly replacing in the dismantled radio receiver. His fingers, the long, supple fingers of an expert technician, were incredibly deft. They lost none of their deftness by the fact that he was in a hurry.

He worked silently, and Fred Vanray, the chemist, and Elton Ahrm, the navigator, watched in growing impatience. There was silence in all the little ship. It hung in the silence of the outer void, beyond the orbit of the planets, beyond Pluto. The ship, and its occupants, were waiting for Ludlow to finish repairing the radio receiver, which had squealed into indignant silence when a condenser shorted.

"Yeah, get a move on," Elton Ahrm added. "I want to know if that snatch we got before the set went blooie was some super thriller or whether the announcer back on earth was giving out with the truth."

"It couldn't have been an honest newscast," Fred Vanray said quickly. "We tuned into the middle of some adventure story broadcast. That's the only possible explanation. That part about thousands of people committing suicide, because of some new disease—" Abruptly the chemist lit a cigarette. "It's not possible," he ended, choking over a mouthful of smoke.

Ahrm flicked a glance at him, then looked away. "I hope not," he said. The navigator was somewhat phlegmatic. On the surface, he didn't scare easily. Vanray was inclined to be impulsive, and showed it.

"If you two will only shut up while I put this triply-damned receiver back together, I'd appreciate it," Otis—"Oats"—Ludlow snapped. "Ah—" he said, his voice going from irritation to satisfaction as he slipped the last tube back into place. "This will settle it. She's ready to roll." He snapped a switch, leaned back in his chair, and mopped the perspiration from his forehead.

Vanray and Ahrm leaned forward.

There was a soft hum from the speaker as the rectifier tubes warmed. Then the voice came.

*"Flash! Health service reports outbreak of insanity continuing. Physicians admit they are unable to establish what is causing this disease. The first outbreak came suddenly, without warning, and the health service was caught totally unprepared. However, resources are being mobilized as rapidly as possible and every effort is being made to cope with the malignant microbe—if a microbe is responsible."*

The voice was coming from earth. The announcer seemed to choke, then came again.

*"However, ladies and gentlemen, you can be certain of one thing: The health service is on the job one hundred per cent. Every physician and every nurse available have been called to duty. Specialists in microscopy, working with the electron microscope, are already seeking the germ that has caused*

*this sudden outbreak of nervous prostrations. And they'll find it. You can bet they'll find it. They haven't failed yet. With a tradition of hundreds of years of service behind them, they won't fail now. Their suggestion to you is, above everything else, be calm. Lie down if possible. Don't indulge in violent physical exertion. And don't worry."*

The announcer got his voice under control.

*"That's it, folks. Don't worry. Remember the keenest minds on earth are working on this problem. They're working for you, with you. And they ask that you work with them. You can do this by remaining calm and going about your duties just as if nothing was happening. If you feel an attack of hysteria coming on, lie down and rest. Remember, also, that you are being told the facts as they develop. Good or bad, whatever the facts are, you get them. We'll have more news for you in just a—"*  
*Click!*

THE voice of the announcer went into sudden silence. A hum came from the loudspeaker.

"Damn this receiving set! It's on the blink again." Oats Ludlow brought his chair forward with a bang. Profanely he began to dig into the depths of the radio set.

Fred Vanray's face had whitened. "It's—it's not true," he whispered.

Ahrm took a slow drag on his cigarette. He didn't say anything.

"It's an adventure story, a thriller." Vanray said.

Ahrm smoked in silence.

"It has to be that," the chemist insisted. He looked fiercely at Ahrm.

"I'm not arguing with you," the navigator said. "But—"

"What?"

"But they don't put commercials on the beam that is radiated to space," Ahrm said tonelessly. "Not enough people out in space to make advertising pay profits. Hence, no commercials. Hence, no thrillers. News, music, yes. We're listening to the special space beam. The ordinary broadcasts, radiated to be heard on earth, don't get through the Heaviside layers. So—"

"Maybe they've changed things," Vanray said. "We've been out here beyond Pluto for seven months, exploring the trans-Plutonian bodies. Maybe—Oats," fretfully, the chemist turned to Ludlow. "Haven't you got that damned receiver fixed yet?"

Oats Ludlow was young, but he was boss of this little expedition sent out from earth to make explorations beyond Pluto. His face was lean and brown. Thoughtful now. Very thoughtful. He had quit working on the receiver. He was frowning as he stared at the radio. A soft hum was coming from the speaker.

"What's the matter?" Vanray questioned. "Can't you repair it?"

"Nope," said Ludlow. "Not anything wrong with it."

"Huh?"

Ludlow flicked ashes at the radio.

"It's working," he said. "But—"

"No beam. No radiations. Nothing to come in over the radio, so nothing is coming in."

"Hey, wait a minute," Ahrm protested.

Ludlow swung his chair around. "The transmitter on earth is not working," he said slowly. "It's off the ether."

Vanray said nothing. Ahrm blinked. "But that transmitter *never* goes off the ether," he protested. "It's in operation twenty-four hours a day. It has to be. Space ships take directional readings on it and ride the beam back to earth. If it quits working, ships will be left stranded all over the solar system."

THE navigator had lost some of his imperturbability. Worry showed on his face. He knew how the radio beam was used. It not only carried news, music, entertainment, to ships in space, but provided a never-failing compass pointing the way back home. Ships going from Mars to Earth, from Venus to Earth, from the asteroid belt to Earth, rode the beam home. Otherwise they could—and before the beam was put into operation—*had*, got themselves thoroughly lost. Out in space you could see a million, million stars. You had to pick out earth from all those blazing points of light. And, if the earth was between you and the sun, you couldn't see it at all. Under such conditions, navigation was by grunt and guess, and navigators were important people.

Because it was a sign-board of space, the beam operated every hour of every day and every minute of every hour.

"I know all about it," Ludlow said, staring at Ahrm. "The beam can't quit. But the beam has quit. It also happens that we are just starting back home and the beam has gone off the ether before we have a directional reading on earth."

Vanray started to say something and choked it off. He jerked himself to his feet, strode to the port, and looked out. Ludlow pointed questioning eyes at Ahrm.

"Sure," the navigator said. "I can get us back. That's why I'm here, because I know navigation. I'll have to take a sight on the sun and a sight on a couple of fixed stars. Then I'll have to dig out my charts and see where the earth is and in what direction it's moving relative to us. Also I'll have to check where the other planets are and how they're moving. Then I'll establish a tentative line and we'll run down it for a while. Then I'll check again and establish another line, and—Hell, I can get us back. It may take weeks, but we're in no immediate danger, and we'll get home sometime. The thing that bothers me, Oats—"

"Is two things," Ludlow interrupted. "The fact that the beam is gone is one of them. The other is that damned newscast. Ahrm, what the hell is happening to the folks back home?"

"I don't know," the navigator said thoughtfully. "Look, Oats, why don't we call the base on Pluto? They may have some dope."

"I'll do that," said Ludlow emphatically. He snapped the switch that fed current into the transmitter, picked up the microphone.

"Calling Pluto Base," his voice droned into the mike. "Calling Pluto Base. Ship Cyclops, returning from exploring trans-Plutonian bodies, calling Pluto Base. The earth beam is off. Have you any news? Cyclops, calling Pluto Base. Go ahead, Pluto."

He cut out the transmitter, tuned the receiver, waited for an answer. Over the sub-ether radio beam, used exclusively in space ship communication because the

sub-ether radiations traveled about eighteen times faster than standard radio waves, the answer should come almost instantly. No answer came.

LUDLOW waited, and the seconds ticked into minutes. The frown on his face became more intense. Out of the corner of his eyes, he could see Fred Vanray staring from the port. Vanray's hands were balled into fists. Beside him, he could hear Elton Ahrm trying to breathe softly, and not succeeding.

Ludlow kicked current into the transmitter. Urgently he spoke into the microphone. "Calling Pluto Base. Cyclops, calling Pluto Base. Go ahead, Pluto Base."

He waited for an answer.

It didn't come.

Ludlow turned to the navigator. "We can't be very far from Pluto," he said quietly. "Will you plot a course that will take us there?"

Ahrm nodded, ducked out of the radio room. Ludlow heard the navigator's feet thud as he ran toward the control room in the nose. He glanced once at Vanray, then rose and followed.

When he entered the control room, Ahrm was already buried in a mass of charts. From the control chair, Thad Vaughn, the fourth member of this small exploratory expedition, looked up.

"What's up, Oats?" he asked. "I've been waiting for a line so I could get this crate moving."

"No beam," said Ludlow. Succinctly, he told Vaughn what had happened.

Thad Vaughn was a brawny young man. Over six feet tall and muscled like a Hercules. Good-natured and careless, nothing ever mattered very much to Thad.

"What the heck is going on?" Vaughn questioned.

Ludlow shrugged.

"We're lucky," Ahrm spoke from the midst of his charts. "Pluto is almost in our lap. We'll be there in an hour."

He came across the room, silently handed a set of co-ordinators to Ludlow, who passed them on to Vaughn.

"Here's a line on Pluto," Ludlow said. "Burn the drivers off this buggy getting us there."

"Done."

Vaughn shoved the power bar gently home. In the rear of the little ship, a giant began to growl. Droning, the driving engines began to pick up speed.

## II.

LESS than an hour later, the drivers were groaning, as reversed, they braked the ship. Pluto was a cold shadow rising up out of the void.

The radio was still silent.

Fred Vanray came into the control room, started to ask a question, and changed his mind.

"Here's Pluto," said Vaughn, from the control chair. "I assume we will land at the base?" Ludlow nodded and Vaughn flattened out the course of the ship, sent it

hurtling high above the frozen surface toward the experimental base station that had been established here on this lifeless little world.

Ludlow picked up a pair of binoculars and walked to the port. He watched the torn, frozen terrain hurtling by below the ship. Off there on a flat plain, like a tiny turtle humped up on a rock, was the concrete, steel, and glass dome of the base. Ludlow put the glasses to his eyes, thumbed the focusing screw.

He took one look, jerked the glasses away, turned startled eyes at his companions.

"What is it?" Ahrm said quickly.

Ludlow didn't answer. He looked again, to make sure. Thad Vaughn grunted, dipped the flier down toward the base, and abruptly sheered off.

"Cripes!" Vaughn shouted. "What the hell has happened down there?"

Through the glasses, Ludlow could clearly see the concrete, glass, and steel that had formed the dome. *Had formed it!* There was a hole in the dome big enough to drive their flier through. The heavy glass was shattered, the steel twisted and sheared.

Ahrm and Vanray were at the port with him. The ship was close enough for them to see with the unaided eye.

Ludlow saw the tangled mass of torn wreckage. When that hole had opened in the dome, the air had rushed out into the near vacuum of Pluto's atmosphere. The men inside.... Well, within minutes the temperature had dropped to absolute zero. The men had clawed at their chests, fought for air, had not found it, had found the cold instead, had died. No wonder Pluto Base didn't answer radio calls!

Re-focusing the glasses, Ludlow peered through the hole into the interior of the dome. He could see two men... both dead. And both in space suits.

"An explosion inside the dome?" Elton Ahrm's voice was a question.

Ludlow studied the rift in the hemisphere. It was a huge round hole, with cracks radiating out from it. "No," he said. "No explosion. That hole was blown in the dome from the outside, not from the inside."

Ahrm swallowed suddenly. "Hell, Oats," he said. "Hell—"

"Shall I land?" Thad Vaughn asked.

"Yes," Ludlow answered. "There may be somebody still alive inside the dome. We may be able to help. But before we land, lift her up high."

VAUGHN set the little ship on her tail, shoved her high into the sky. Ludlow swept his glasses in a circle. Out there was space, lit by the light of twice ten thousand suns. Black space with balls of fire caught somehow in its fabric. Space, cold and grim and full of hate for all forms of life. Life ventured here on threat of instant death. Space hated life, was always waiting to snuff it out. How space must hate human beings, that, from the protection of their fragile shells of steel and quartz, thumbed their noses at it! How it must plot to wipe them out, all of them!

Out across space, Ludlow swept his glasses in a slow circle.

"Looking for someone?" Ahrm queried huskily.

"Yeah," the commander answered. "Someone who might have done that!" He jerked an expressive thumb down toward the shattered dome.

"That's impossible!" Vanray blurted. "There was an explosion. It couldn't have been anything else. There's nothing in the solar system that would deliberately attack a base and kill all the occupants?"

"There's not supposed to be," Ludlow answered. "But down there they're dead."

He was shaken, startled, and although he would never admit it, scared half to death. So were the others. He completed his inspection of the sky. "Set her down, Thad," he said. "I don't see anything."

Vaughn set the ship on the ground outside the blasted dome.

"Vanray, you stay here," Ludlow ordered, pulling on a heavy space suit. "Handle the lock for us. After we get out, you get on the transmitter and see if you can raise earth. Report what happened here, if you can get through. Keep in touch with us through the auxiliary set and keep on the lookout." Vaughn and Ahrm following, he clumped into the air lock.

The inner door closed behind them. Through the heavy glass, they could see Vanray's pale face as he manipulated the controls.

"Turn on the oxygen," Ludlow said.

The outer door opened. Their suits, released from the effects of the restraining pressure, puffed out as they stepped down to the frozen surface of Pluto.

The entrance to the dome was closed, but at the ground level was a huge crack in the concrete. It was wide enough to squeeze through. Ludlow stared at it, let his eyes run up the dome. Fifty feet up the crack suddenly widened. Ahrm pointed, spoke.

"Golly, Oats. That hole. Somebody from the outside drove a beam through the dome. When the beam hit, the pressure inside the base exploded the dome. But what—" Over the radio in their suits his voice trailed off as he tried to imagine what had driven a beam through the dome of Pluto base.

"I don't know what," Ludlow answered. "But hell is loose in this system. Come on. Let's go inside. We may be able to discover what happened."

They squeezed through the crack in the wall. Just inside was a man, in a space suit.

HE had been a man. Sprawled on the floor, he was frozen as stiff as an icicle. There was a long gash in his space suit. A sharp instrument had sliced through the tough, rubberized fabric and had cut the man half in two.

"Cripes!" Thad Vaughn gasped. "Something cut him half in two! What—"

He didn't get an answer.

They went on through the dome. They were the only living men in it.

There had been others. Ahrm pointed to their ineffectual attempt to man a long unused defense beam. The men at the beam did not have on space suits.

"Something attacked them," Ahrm choked. "They saw it coming, tried to line up a beam. Before they could get into action, a hole was blown in the dome. The air went. Those who were trying to get the beam into action died. Those who had enough time to get into space suits lived a little longer... long enough to face a landing party. What in heaven did this, Oats?"

"I don't know," Ludlow answered. "It's—it's impossible. The system is at peace. There are no pirates, no outlaws. The Martians forgot all about war thousands of years before the first space ship landed. The Venusians fight all right, but they're

primitives, fighting each other. They don't have space ships... All I know is we've got to get this information back to earth, fast. If we can't get through by radio, we've got to take it ourselves. Something may be happening back there."

Ludlow caught his breath. Something *had been* happening back on earth. Not an attack. A new disease. Madly he wondered if there was any connection between the disease on earth and the attack on Pluto base. He decided it was preposterous.

A new voice sounded in his earphones. The voice of Fred Vanray, back in their flier. Vanray was incoherent. "The earth beam is back on. I'll cut you in so you can listen."

A different voice started speaking, the voice of the announcer at a transmitter back on earth. Vanray was relaying it to them on the auxiliary radio of the ship. The voice was that of a man who is fighting to control himself.

*"All ships in space be on the lookout. The health service reports that the epidemic of nervous prostrations is not due to a new microbe. It is not caused by a germ at all, but by the concentration of a ray of infinitely high frequency upon earth. The origin of this ray is not known and scientists are unable to trace it as yet... All ships be on the lookout for a strange ship, or fleet of ships, anywhere in the solar system. Report immediately if you discover a strange vessel. Scientists suggest the beam may be originating from a ship in space... The effect of the beam is to cause a rapid disintegration of nervous tissue, resulting in disorganization not only of the brain but of the secondary nervous system... We were off the air because one of our technicians, driven to madness by this beam, destroyed our transmitter. We are operating now with auxiliary equipment... The beam is striking a little less than half the earth... There is chaos here. Suicides, wrecks, fires. All ships have been grounded to keep the crews from going mad and wrecking them. This order resulted from the wreck of the GREEN STAR, of the line of the same name. The GREEN STAR, crack passenger liner of the fleet, was inbound from Mars. Apparently this hellish beam struck the ship, the crew going insane. In attempting to land, the GREEN STAR crashed. All passengers and the crew were instantly killed... A terrible catastrophe... All ships be on the lookout—"*  
*Crash!*

The voice of the announcer went into abrupt silence.

### III.

THROUGH his helmet, Oats Ludlow could see Elton Ahrm's face. It was the color of paste. A choked curse sounded from Thad Vaughn.

"That crash didn't come over the beam from earth!" Ludlow gasped. "It came from the ship. Our flier's mike picked it up! Vanray!" he shouted into the transmitter in his space suit. "Fred!"

Vanray didn't answer.

"Something has happened to Fred!" he said. "Come on."



His heart was trying to break his ribs as he raced from the dome. Ahrm and Vaughn were right behind him. They squeezed through the crack.

"What in the hell is that?" Vaughn shouted.

A long, dark shadow was lying on the ground beside their ship. A hundred feet long, it looked like a fat cigar. A solid shadow.

And as they stared, a second shadow seemed to puff into existence beside the first one. One instant it was not there. The next second, there it was.

It seemed to puff out of nowhere. Once it had appeared, it looked solid. It nosed to the ground. An opening appeared in its side.

"VANRAY, look out!" Ludlow shouted into the microphone built into his suit.

Those two fat, cigar-shaped shadows were space ships. Small fliers, probably very fast. How they had appeared so suddenly Ludlow did not know. But he did know Vanray should have been on the alert. The second these ships appeared he should have lifted their flier into the air, blasted it from the ground. Later, if he escaped, Vanray could have returned for them.

Vanray was asleep at the switch.

Then Ludlow saw that the outer door of the lock on their ship was open. They had left it closed. At the same time something peered at them from the control room.

The second shadow, puffing out of nothingness, touched the ground, a door opened in its side. Out of that opening there came—

Giants! They were human in form, but in their space suits, they were at least ten feet tall. Giants! Six of them tumbled out of the second ship as soon as it touched the ground. They looked big and clumsy but they charged the three humans with the nimbleness of trained athletes.

Each carried a shield and a long sword!

Ludlow could scarcely believe his eyes. The sight was paralyzing. Giants! If they had charged with belching heat guns, with splashing disintegration pistols, Ludlow might conceivably have understood them. But they came with round shields and broadswords.

Once, such weapons had been used on earth. King Arthur's men, the forces under Charlemagne, the brawny warriors of Charles Martel, had used broadswords. But that was thousands of years in the past. In the thirty-first century, to use such weapons would be to commit suicide.

Giants with broadswords!

Built into each space suit manufactured on earth, for use in an emergency, was a holster carrying a small pistol. The little gun was a heat pistol, hurling a radio frequency beam that turned to heat on contact with a target.

Thad Vaughn took one look at the charging giants and went for his gun.

"Don't!" Ludlow shouted. "We don't have a chance—"

Too late. Vaughn pulled the gun. Thad Vaughn never went looking for a fight, he never hunted trouble. He was a happy, careless youngster, as good-natured as the day was long, but when he saw trouble coming he didn't stop to think.

The gun throbbed in his hand.

The first giant was almost on top of Vaughn. He saw the gun drawn, lifted his shield. The beam splashed against the metal, spluttered in harmless fury. A

shield, even in a fight involving modern weapons, was a handy thing. The warrior caught the beam on his shield. His long sword flicked out.

THE sword was a good eight feet long. A human would have lifted it with difficulty. Lifting it even against the lighter gravity of Pluto, a man would never have been able to use it effectively. In the hands of the giant who owned it, the sword seemed to be as light as a toothpick.

Thad Vaughn saw it coming. He tried to squirm aside, to dodge. It caught him, went through the tough fabric of his space suit, went through him.

Ludlow choked in helpless fury. He went for his own gun, saw a sword coming toward him, and barely had time to raise his hands over his head. To attempt to resist would be to commit suicide.

It was all over in an instant. Before Thad Vaughn could fall, three swords went through him. He screamed once, then his voice gurgled quickly into silence.

Oats Ludlow and Elton Ahrm, hands above their heads, were looking at the sharp points of swords. The points gestured for them to move. Gloved hands jerked the pistols from their holsters, shoved them toward their ship.

Inside their flier were two giants. They had gone through the air lock. Fred Vanray, an ugly bruise on the side of his head, was just recovering consciousness.

"Oats..." he muttered dazedly. "That broadcast... The GREEN STAR crashed... Oats, it crashed..." For the first time, he seemed to see the giants. "What—what happened? Where did these things come from? Who are they?"

"They came while you were listening to the radio," Ludlow said. There was more he could have said, but he checked himself, suddenly remembering that the GREEN STAR had gone down. There was pain in his eyes as he looked at Fred Vanray. And he had no heart to give Vanray hell for being so dazed at what he had heard over the radio that he forgot to keep alert... Ludlow turned to the giants.

"What the hell is this?" he demanded.

He got no answer.

Using magnetic grapples, the two ships lifted the Cyclops from the frozen surface of Pluto, headed into space.

"Where are they taking us?" Vanray asked. The chemist was still in a daze. He seemed not to comprehend what had happened, or not to care.

Ludlow didn't answer. He went to the port, looked out. The giants guarding him watched every move but did not attempt to stop him. He could see Pluto far below them. The two ships were lifting the Cyclops with perfect ease, heading into the vastness of empty space.

It was this same emptiness that Ludlow had surveyed before he landed on Pluto. He hadn't seen the two ships. But they must have been somewhere near and they must have seen the Cyclops.

Suddenly space was no longer empty. Suddenly it seemed to be filled with a vast bulk that obscured the stars. "Look!" Ludlow gasped.

Ahrm came to the port.

"A ship two miles long!" he whispered.

SHE was lying at rest in the void, a vast construction, at least two miles in length. The ships were lugging the Cyclops straight toward her and an opening was yawning in her side to receive them.

"How did we happen to miss seeing that thing?" Ahrm demanded.

"Invisible," Ludlow answered. "She seemed to puff into existence, just as the two ships that got us puffed into existence. They were holding her invisible—bending light rays around her will account for that—so we didn't see her. Great grief, Ahrm! She's so big she carries ships the size of the Cyclops as life boats!"

Big, bigger than anything ever built on earth, bigger than anything ever built in the solar system, the huge ship lay in the void. Now that they had approached near it, they were inside the screen of invisibility, and it could be clearly seen. Like a huge cigar it lay in lifeless space. Rows of lighted ports twinkled away along its vast sides.

Abreast, the three ships went through the gaping port in the side of the space monster, eased down into what looked like a landing field. Cradled on one side, each in its own stall, were dozens of fliers of the size that had carried the Cyclops here.

"It's a flying fleet!" Ahrm gasped.

The lock opened. A giant looked in. He spoke rapidly to the ones in the flier. They turned, gestured to the humans.

"I think they want to talk to one of us," Ludlow said, interpreting the gestures. "I'll go."

Head up, he stepped into the lock. It closed behind him.

Watching through the port, Ahrm saw him striding off, surrounded by giants.

#### IV.

FRED VANRAY was pacing restlessly inside the radio room. Vanray's face had a faintly yellowish tinge. His eyes were open but he did not seem to see.

Elton Ahrm huddled dispiritedly in a chair. The ash tray at his elbow was full of cigarette stubs but he was not smoking. Tobacco had lost its taste. He waited, and tried to think, and then tried not to think.

Over two hours had passed and Oats Ludlow had not yet returned.

The giants had quitted the Cyclops. They had searched it carefully first, peering and prying into every locker, into every hidden corner, removing every weapon. Then they had left the Cyclops, leaving Vanray and Ahrm alone, like trapped rats in a cage.

Outside the ship a careless guard paced back and forth. He wasn't much interested in the humans. Seemed to consider them beneath his notice, to despise them.

Vanray tried the radio again. No sound came from the speaker.

"It won't work, Fred," Ahrm said dispiritedly. "The metal hull of the big ship serves as a shield. Radio waves can't get through it."

Vanray sighed.

What are they, Ahrm thought. Slavers? A warrior race ranging space? Where did they come from?

The navigator swore at himself. He was thinking again. He mustn't let himself think.

"I wish to hell they'd bring Oats back," he muttered. Without Ludlow, he felt lost.

Vanray started pacing again. Ahrm looked at him, then looked away, looked through the port, saw the careless guard out there. He didn't want to see that, either. He shut his eyes.

When he shut his eyes, he started thinking, which was worse than looking. His mind kept trying to reason about this race of giants that had spawned miraculously within the system. Perhaps they hadn't come from within the solar system. Perhaps they belonged to a planet circling another sun, lost somewhere in the void of space? No. That was foolish. It would take too long for them to cross the void. True, humans had ships that would cross it, given time, but they had not crossed it yet. That was for the future. Lack of speed held them back. Earth ships could not approach the speed of light and a speed greater than light was necessary to cross the void. It was impossible. No object could travel faster than light.

*He wished to hell Oats would come back.*

Oats knew a hell of a lot. Oats was a physicist. Would Oats ever come back?

AHRM doubted it. To this race of giants, humans were little more than bugs. Perhaps, somewhere within this vast ship, they were dissecting Oats, cutting a muscle here, and watching what happened, slicing a nerve there.

Perhaps, after they finished with Oats, they would come for Vanray and him. He wondered which they would choose first. Vanray looked like he wouldn't give a damn.

There was a clang from the lock. Ahrm jumped to his feet. Oats Ludlow was leaning against the inner door of the lock. They had brought him back.

Ahrm helped him through the lock, led him to a chair. Oats sprawled into the seat. His face was purple, his heart pounding so hard that Ahrm could hear it.

"I'm all right," Oats whispered. "Or I will be—in a few minutes. The air the Gorlii breathe is—heavy with oxygen... It burns up a man. Give me a cigarette."

"Gorlii?" Ahrm whispered, grabbing cigarette and lighter at the same time.

"Yes," Ludlow answered, sucking gratefully at the smoke. "That's what they call themselves. A pleasant people—to be in hell!"

"What did they do to you, Oats?"

"To me? Nothing. Just asked me questions. That was why they took us alive, so they could ask questions. They attacked the base on Pluto to get a prisoner for questioning, but the landing party got too enthusiastic... Then we came along and they took us. They want to know about the solar system, and about earth."

"About earth? Don't they know anything about it?"

"Not much. Only what they've been able to discover through high power telescopes. How far is it to 61 Cygni?"

"61 Cygni?" Ahrm was rattled. "That's a star. It's about seven light years away."

"That's where the Gorlii came from," Ludlow said.

"Oh, hell, no," Ahrm protested. "They couldn't have come from there. It's too far, take too long. Oats, you're off—"

"My nut? No. They came from a planet circling 61 Cygni. I talked to the high panjandrum, to the big shot, the Boss—You ought to see him! He sits on a throne, with guards standing at attention all around him. His chest is covered with medals and his face is covered with—scars. I thought I've seen some tough people, but he is far and way the toughest I've ever seen... Yes, they came from 61 Cygni. The Boss told me so. The trip took about three months. They move faster than light. I know... I know... It can't be done. But the Gorlii do it. They're starting accelerating now, moving in on earth."

Ahrm's face was a mass of wrinkles. As a navigator, he knew astronomy, and astronomical distances. "All right," he said. "If you tell me they move faster than light, I'll believe it. I'm almost ready to believe anything. But what do they want? What are they? Slavers? Traders? A warrior race?"

Ludlow grunted. "They're slavers, if they can use a conquered race. They're warriors, if they can find somebody to fight. But they're so damned powerful they can't find a race that will give them a fight. In consequence, they're hunters. They're looking for a new hunting ground right now. All their old hunting grounds, the planets of their own system, are worn out. No game left."

"Game?" There was horror in Ahrm's voice.

"Big game," Ludlow answered stolidly. "Back on earth, game refuges are still maintained, in the heart of Africa. Sportsmen go there, make safari, hunt under the same conditions as our ancestors centuries ago. The Gorlii are hunters too... of human game."

LUDLOW choked over his cigarette, coughed. "This is a sporting expedition, a safari across space. Hunters coming down the sky. Earth will be good hunting, as long as the game lasts... When they sent me away, they were excited no end. Even the Boss was excited. They had found a whole solar system swarming with game."

For minutes, Ahrm was stunned. That another race might find good sport hunting humans had not occurred to him. Then he burst out.

"The damned fools! They'll find they're taken the tiger by the tail! Do they think we are defenseless? Don't they know that we've got space ships too? When they tackle earth, they'll run into something worse than a hornet's nest. They'll find the sky full of fighters. Not little ships like this one we were using. Battleships, cruisers, destroyers. Nothing as big as the ship of the Gorlii, but a thousand times more numerous."

His face lit at the thought. He hated war, but he came of a warrior race. For centuries there had been peace in the Solar system. But the tradition of war was not forgotten. There were ships, and men to fly them. Fighting ships and fighting men!

"They'll find a hot reception!" Ahrm said.

Slowly Ludlow shook his head. "No," he said.

"What do you mean? We've got plenty of fighters!"

"But no men fit to fly them," Ludlow said. "You seem to have forgotten. Earth is being bathed in a beam of high frequency radiation, which causes insanity. We've got the ships—but there will be no crews to man them!"

There was sudden silence in the flier.

"Is that beam coming from this ship?" Vanray spoke for the first time.

"Yes," said Ludlow. "They decided the human race would be plenty tough, so they sent along ahead of them a beam designed to soften us up. Only organized opposition can defeat the Gorlii. And you can't organize fighting forces if half the planet is suffering from nervous prostration."

Vanray stared at Ludlow. He shook his head. His lips suddenly narrowed into a knife line. Burning lights appeared in his eyes. His hands balled into fists.

From far-off in the vast ship came a mighty drone, a deep-throated bass roar. Engines warming up, building up energy. In some vortex seething forces were surging to life, forces strong enough to move unguessed tons of steel across space. Perceptibly, the ship began to move.

Vanray turned on his heel. Ludlow saw a little trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth, and he knew the chemist had bitten his lips until they were bleeding. His sympathy went out to the chemist. But there wasn't anything that could be done about it.

"But isn't there anything—" Ahrm gulped.

Oats Ludlow shrugged tired shoulders. "I tried to convince them that peace was better than war, that there was nothing to gain by attacking, conquering, destroying... They laughed at me. Sport is what they want, sport with the long sword. They have power beams and other powerful weapons, to use if they meet a strong enemy, but what they want is sport. They use their beams to reduce the outer defenses—if there are any—then go in with the sword. They don't mind dying, if they can die fighting, and they don't see why any other race should mind. If people don't want to fight, they're slugs to be trampled under foot... Work? A Gorlii never conceived the idea, unless it was in the building or the manning of a fighting ship... Work? Worlds of slaves for that!"

LUDLOW came to his feet, fist smacking into his open palm with a sharp cracking sound. "If we had time to devise a defense, we'd give them the fight they want. We are a peaceful people, but there would be merry hell in this part of the universe if we had a chance to man our fleets!"

His voice changed as he spoke. It had grown stronger, and there were rumbling undertones in it. Defiance mingled with helplessness. If only he could do something! But what could he do? Three humans against the massed might of the Gorlii!

Far away in the vast liner the engines roared louder, pushing the ship toward earth at constantly increasing speed. How long would it be before the Gorlii reached earth? At a speed faster than light, it would take perhaps five or six hours, counting the time consumed in building up speed and in losing it when they wished to halt. Five or six hours—faster than light—

How in the hell did they manage to travel faster than light, Ludlow wondered.

As though in answer to his question, the note of a giant harp flooded through the ship, a long held boom that echoed and then boomed again. It was a signal of some kind.

Ahrm looked up questioningly. At the port, Vanray turned. Outside the ship Ludlow saw the guard. At the sound of the gong, he had left off his pacing and was standing rigidly at attention, as though waiting.

Like a flash of light, an attack of dizziness struck Oats Ludlow. A million different pains tore at him. He felt as if every atom in his body was suddenly trying to turn over. A vertigo struck him. Nausea twisted his stomach. Blindness like a blanket folded over his eyes.

As suddenly as it had come, the vertigo passed. Ludlow grasped at the radio bench for support. At the port, he saw Vanray holding on. Ahrm was picking himself up from the floor. They had felt it too.

"What—what the hell happened?" Ahrm gasped.

"A Wallachian field," Ludlow answered. "The Gorlii set up a Wallachian field. That's why the gong was sounded, to warn everybody that the field was being set up."

"A what?" Ahrm rasped.

"A Wallachian field," Ludlow answered. Seeing the look on Ahrm's face, he quickly explained. "Sorry. I forgot you hadn't specialized in physics. A Wallachian field is—You know that an electro-magnet, when current is set flowing through its coils, sets up a magnetic field around its poles. Well, that magnetic field is a rough analogy to a Wallachian field. It takes its name from Wallach, who discovered it. It's a force field. When it is being set up, the rays of force flowing out from the center of generation, distort and slightly compress all matter within the field. If a human being is within range, it makes him sick as the devil for a few moments. Then the effect passes, but the distortion remains as long as the field is being generated. Holy cats!" Ludlow gasped. "That's the answer!"

"The answer to what?" Ahrm demanded.

"The answer to how the Gorlii travel faster than light," Ludlow answered.

THE tired droop had gone from his shoulders, the hopelessness from his eyes. "We have known for centuries that matter cannot travel faster than light. Einstein, I think, developed the first equations on the subject. Later researches showed that the reason matter could not travel faster than light, was because the instant it did attain that speed, it ceased to be matter, as we know it, but slipped into the negative energy levels. In other words, matter can go faster than light, but if it does, it isn't matter any longer. The Gorlii have overcome that difficulty. They establish a Wallachian field around their ship, and the pressure of this field holds them and their ship out of the negative energy levels—"

"So what?" Ahrm asked, bewildered. "This Wallachian field enables them to go faster than light. What is there about that to make you so excited, Oats?"

Ludlow *was* excited. He was breathing rapidly, his face flushed. He looked through the port at the guard, then whispered. "A Wallachian field is an unstable space condition. It can be collapsed. If, when this ship is traveling faster than light, the protective field is collapsed—"

Ludlow stopped, stared at Ahrm. There were new, hard lines on his face.

Off in the vast construction, the mighty engines howled anew, hurling the ship and its hunting horde toward new fields of game.

## V.

ELTON AHRM watched. Two hours had passed and Oats Ludlow was still working. Oats had torn the guts from the radio transmitter, he had ripped coils from the receiver, he had raided the supply chest for all the silver and copper wire in the ship.

On the bench from which the radio had been removed, an instrument was taking shape. Ludlow was building it, fitting the parts together with incredibly deft fingers.

"Oats—" Ahrm ventured.

"Shut up!" Ludlow answered.

He went on working. He had no time to talk.

In the vast liner, the driving engines had ceased howling, and had settled down to a resonant hum. The ship had reached its speed. It was flying faster than light.

Outside their little flier, a guard lolled. The three humans were scarcely worth the compliment of a guard.

Uneasy apprehension in his eyes, Ahrm watched Ludlow. As did every earthling, he had a groundwork in all sciences, including physics. He was beginning to be afraid that he knew what Oats was building.

Ludlow suddenly quit working.

"It's finished," he said.

Neither Ahrm nor Vanray said anything. Ludlow's face was grim.

"This is a generator," Ludlow said, pointing to the device he had constructed. "It sets up oscillations that will collapse a Wallachian field."

Deeper lines appeared on his face as he spoke. "You might call it a bomb," he said. "It will have the effect of one—the biggest bomb that was ever built. To set it off, all you have to do is close this switch."

For an instant, he hesitated, then his voice was strong. "There is a guard outside this ship. I am going to lead that guard a merry chase away from here. While he is gone I want you to take our flier through the main lock." He looked at Ahrm and Vanray.

"I get it," said Ahrm slowly. "You want us to take our flier and scat. Meanwhile, what will you be doing, Oats?"

"I'll be busy," Ludlow said evasively.

"Um," said Ahrm thoughtfully. "You know, we do have an excellent chance to escape. The Gorlii think we are so unimportant they don't even bother to watch us closely. Yes, we have a chance to escape—*all three of us*."

"Just escaping won't help the folks back home," Ludlow said slowly. "The Gorlii don't care if we escape, because they know we can't do anything if we do get away. In fact, they would probably like to have us escape—more game to hunt. The point is: you and Fred have a job to do. When you get back to earth, you are to make a full report on everything that happened. Especially you are to tell our scientists about the Wallachian field, so they can investigate it more thoroughly. That is very important. And that is why you have to escape."

LUDLOW paused, his eyes drilling into Ahrm.

"What about you?" said Ahrm.

"I'll be busy," Ludlow said.

Ahrm shook his head.



"This is an order," Ludlow said.

"I don't care if it is an order!" Ahrm blazed. "You damned fool, don't you think I know what you're going to do? You're fixing it so Fred and I will escape. *You'll* stay here. You'll set off the bomb. You and this whole damned ship—" Ahrm shivered. "I don't know what will happen but I know you're not staying here. *I'm* the one who will do that. And don't go chucking your rank around. I don't give a damn if you're the grand admiral of the whole earth fleet!"

Ahrm spoke fiercely, angrily.

Ludlow's face was grimmer than ever. "You'll do as I say—"

"You're both wrong," Fred Vanray interrupted. "I'll do the staying."

The chemist had taken no part in the argument. He had been in a daze ever since the Gorlii appeared. Now he walked over to the instrument Ludlow had built. "Is this the switch, Oats?" he asked. "Is this the switch that sets it off?"

In the heavy silence that followed there came from the distance the bull bellow of a mighty engine, an engine tuning up in preparation for braking the ship. The sound drove Ludlow almost to distraction. He knew what it meant. The Gorlii were coming in to earth. The ship was beginning to slow in preparation for a landing.

"You two listen to me!" he snarled. "I'll do the staying."

"Nope," said Elton Ahrm.

"Oh no," said Fred Vanray.

Ludlow stared at them. They were both defiant. "No time to argue," he decided. "I'll cut a piece of wire into three lengths. We'll draw. The short piece stays."

From the table he snatched a length of silver wire, cut three lengths from it, rolled them in his hands.

"Draw!" he said, thrusting toward the chemist his closed fist with three pieces of wire sticking out from it.

Vanray drew. He turned his back to look at the length.

Ludlow thrust his hand toward Ahrm. "Draw," he said. "I'll take what's left."

Fascinated, Ahrm's hand went out. He looked at what he had drawn, gasped, quickly closed his hand.

"I have the short one," said Ludlow, quickly inspecting the remaining piece of wire.

"Do you?" said Vanray, turning. "If it's any shorter than the one I have, I'll eat it. There. Look for yourself." On the radio bench he threw a piece of wire. It was less than half an inch in length.

It was the short straw.

"Damn it, Fred—" Ludlow gasped.

THERE was the ghost of a smile on Vanray's face. "It's the right answer," he said. "I should be the one who stays. If you two should escape, Ahrm will be needed for navigation. You, Oats, will be needed to tell the physicists about the Wallachian field. Me, I won't be needed at all—"

There was such a smile on Vanray's face as goes through dreams.

He picked up the generator, strode to the lock, went through it. Fascinated, Ludlow watched. He saw Vanray leap out and start running. He ran toward the stalls that housed the fliers.

The guard saw him. For an instant, the fellow looked startled. Then he grinned. This was going to be fun. Drawing his long sword, he ran after Vanray.

"To the controls, Ahrm," Ludlow shouted. "Lift her toward the lock. It's now or never."

While Ahrm lifted the flier, Ludlow leaped from the port. He ran to the massive gate set in the side of the vast ship. The controls were simple. He shoved the lever that opened the inner door. The huge mass of steel began to slide aside. Ahrm jerked the Cyclops into the lock. Only the outer door remained to be opened. It would open when the inner door closed. Ludlow shoved the bar that closed the inner door, jerked the one that opened the outer door.

He looked back.

"Goodbye, Fred," he called.

He looked for Vanray. But the chemist was out of sight among the fliers. The guard was running around them looking for him.

Suddenly the doors that led to the heart of the liner opened. Rank after rank of Gorlii appeared in them, wearing space suits and full fighting equipment. Landing parties coming to man the small fliers for the descent to earth.

Hunters going forth for game.

They saw the Cyclops in the lock.

For an instant they stared, then a quick command rapped out. Wheeling with the precision of perfectly trained soldiers, the Gorlii ran to man their fliers.

Oats Ludlow jammed himself through the lock into the Cyclops, leaped to the control room. "I'll take over," he shouted. Ahrm jumped out of the control chair. Ludlow's hands closed over the controls that fed power into the drivers.

The outer door, the gateway to space outside, was opening. Slowly it was sliding aside.

Would it open in time? Would the Gorlii succeed in closing it before it opened wide enough for the Cyclops to pass through? It seemed to move an inch at a time. Ludlow cursed it.

Would it never open?

Another thirty seconds—less than that—it would be open.

IT stopped moving! It started in the other direction, began to close. The Gorlii had reached the levers that controlled it. The door was closing.

Ludlow jammed the power bar. With a roar the drivers took hold. The Cyclops seemed to leap ahead. The opening was not quite wide enough. The slim little ship smashed into it, widened it. There was a screech of tortured metal as the sides of the Cyclops scraped against the closing door.

The flier stopped moving. It was caught in the door.

The groaning drivers bucked, jerked. Steel screamed. The Cyclops leaped forward. It had torn its way out. Like a crazy bronco, it bucked its way free of the ship.

"Give her the gun!" Ahrm screamed.

She already had the gun. She had spurs in her side and was running wild. The drivers were raging with the load they carried. Ludlow fought the careening ship. He had to counteract the speed of the liner before they left the protection of its

field. He jerked the nose of the Cyclops around. The power bars were heavy in his hands as he fought for control of the ship. He had to win. Had to!

He won. The Cyclops righted, began to respond to the controls.

"There's a flier coming out of the lock!" Ahrm shouted, looking back. "They've got a ship out."

"Let him come," said Ludlow grimly. "He'll have a hell of a time catching us."

He yanked the Cyclops away from the Gorlii liner, set it in mad flight through open space. Looking back, he could see the fat cigar that was the flier, nosing out from the vast bulk of the liner.

"Watch the big ship!" he shouted at Ahrm. "Unless Vanray fails, it ought to happen any second."

The great bulk of the space monster was dwindling rapidly in the distance. Off to one side, but in the direction it was traveling, was a huge green ball. Earth! Wreathed in clouds and showers, sapphired with seas, green with spring on the plains, earth lay there in space, her polar ice cap glistening in the sun light. Home for earthlings. Hunting grounds for the Gorlii.

"God!" Ahrm gasped. "Look!"

The Gorlii ship was gone. Off yonder, where it had been, was a vast puff of mushrooming light. It was as if some gigantic bomb had exploded there, a bomb weighing millions of tons. As if a nova had suddenly come into existence. Puffing, boiling smoke riding streamers of white, bursting light.

"It worked!" Ludlow gasped. "Fred turned on the generator, collapsing the Wallachian field. The ship was traveling faster than light. With no protection, it dived headfirst into negative energy, exploding in a burst of gamma rays—"

THE puff of light was still mushrooming out, still flaring, still puffing. Incredible energies were being released there, seething vortices of flame and limitless fury were leaping into existence. For hours it would continue to expand there in space. Then it would die down.

The pursuing flier suddenly veered. Like a startled horse, it raced back toward the puffing flame, veered up to circle it, veered abruptly away, raced out across space, running like a dog with its tail between its legs.

Ludlow was dropping the Cyclops to earth, an hour later. Ahrm came from the radio room in the control nook. Ahrm's face was green. He held an open palm toward Ludlow. "Look there," he said.

Ludlow looked. He saw a short piece of silver wire.

"It's—it's the piece Fred drew," Ahrm choked. "Oats, you remember he turned his back on us after he drew. Oats, you can see tooth marks on that piece of wire. Oats, Fred bit that piece of wire in two, so he could get the shortest piece!"

"Oh, Lord," Ludlow gasped. It was silver wire. It was easy to bite in two. He could see the tooth marks on it.

"Why did he do it?" Ahrm asked.

"I didn't know he did it," Ludlow whispered. "But now I know why. He had a girl back on earth. He was in a hurry to get home to her. They were going to be married as soon as he returned. She was coming home too, coming from Mars, to meet him. She was on the GREEN STAR, Ahrm, the ship that crashed when the Gorlii beam hit it."

There was pain in Ludlow's eyes. "The Gorlii killed Fred's girl, in the crash of the GREEN STAR. He had just heard the news when the Gorlii attacked us, back on Pluto. That was why he wasn't watching, wasn't keeping lookout. That was why he fooled us, why he died. So he could get a shot at the slugs who killed her."

Out in space flame was still puffing from what had been the Gorlii ship. Ludlow shook his fist at it.

"Hunt in hell, you dogs," he said. "Hunt in hell."

